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# Norse Topographical Settlement Names on the Western Littoral of Scotland

ARNE KRUSE

To be an immigrant with an interest in onomastics in Scotland is a sobering experience. While in Norway there is a single Germanic onomasticon (with Sámi and Finnish strata in certain areas), Scotland — with a topography quite similar to Norway — shows a multitude of ethnic strata that is both exciting and a bit off-putting in all its complexity. Aware of my own linguistic limitations, I will in this article try to steer clear of detailed etymological analyses. Instead my intention here is, as a foreigner dealing with a research tradition that is not his own, to share some thoughts of a more general nature. I intend to discuss some aspects of the most central work in Scottish onomastics, W. F. H. Nicolaisen's *Scottish Place-Names*,<sup>1</sup> and in particular the chapter on Scandinavian names, which is, of course, the most interesting chapter for a Scandinavian reader.

Years after it was first published *Scottish Place-Names* is still referred to, quite justifiably, as *the* authority on the interpretation of individual Scottish names, as well as on onomastic theory. In a book with so many new observations, overviews, and ideas, it is hardly surprising that there are aspects of it which one finds rather unexpected or with which one even disagrees. I would like to discuss the slight surprise I had whilst reading the chapter on Scandinavian names, focusing on an attitude towards settlements bearing topographical names that I find rather unfamiliar.

Here is a central quotation from the chapter on Scandinavian names, where Nicolaisen comments on the distribution map of names containing the generic *dalr*:<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason to think that it has ever meant anything but what it still means in Norwegian today, i.e. 'a valley'. [...] It must be remembered that *dalr* primarily refers to natural features, although the name of a valley was quite often, at a later date,

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, pp. 94, 96.

transferred to a settlement situated in it. A distribution map of *dalr*-names is therefore not a map of permanent Norse settlement but rather of the sphere of Norse influence. It includes those areas adjacent to permanent settlements in which seasonal exploits such as hunting and fishing and summer grazing were carried out, and probably the odd military raid or friendly visit. In most of those undertakings Norsemen must have been accompanied by Gaelic-speakers as otherwise the names concerned would not have come down to us because of a break in communication. [...] the distribution of *dalr* (Map 8) serves as a reminder that 'settlement area' and 'sphere of influence' are not the same and that the Norsemen must have known the western coastal districts of the mainland from Cape Wrath to the Mull of Kintyre extremely well even if they never (or hardly ever) had any permanent farms or other settlements there. It would be risky to read any more out of, or into, these maps.

In the quotation it seems to be taken for granted that the Norse arriving on the west coast littoral would have ignored the arable and cultivated land in the area. This is certainly not obvious, as this was a most valuable resource to an agrarian based people. Let us, however, for the time being, follow the assumption that the Norse were only seasonal visitors to the mainland and that they, in contact with the local population, left behind their own names for the area. The first part of this essay will be a discussion of this hypothesis in the light of onomastic theory.

Traditional onomastics has been dominated by etymology. Aspects such as the relationship between the place-name and the user-group(s) of the name, and the function of the name as a means of communication, have only more recently appeared on the agenda of place-name researchers. However, an early pioneer in the discussion of such aspects was the Norwegian Magnus Olsen.<sup>3</sup> He stressed that we, as individuals, all have a certain inventory of names stored in our memory. Certain people will know certain names within an area, according to the need which the individual has for the names. Olsen divided the place-names of an area into three types, depending on the creator and/or the user of the names. First, there are names connected with the farm; second, names that are used within the village; and third, names used by people travelling through the area. A farmer knows the detailed landscape within his farm and will need to use names in this microsphere to refer to the landscape within the farm when communicating with others living on the farm. Farmers are not likely to know the names of all the locations on a neighbour's farm. However, within the wider neighbourhood, farmers will together be able to refer to locations by names within the village or the local community. These might include local roads, important natural features, shared areas of utilization, such as common grazing in the hills, and other farms within the community. Finally, according to Magnus Olsen, merchants, fishermen, pilgrims, and other kinds of travellers, for example, along a coast, will be unfamiliar with the names of all the farms in a particular region, but they will know names of importance to them along a wider area of

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<sup>3</sup> Magnus Olsen, *Hvad våre stedsnavn lærer oss* (Oslo: Stenersen, 1934).

travel routes.<sup>4</sup> Names known by people travelling, Olsen says, are names of larger areas and points of orientation, that is, easily recognizable topographical features, such as islands, larger fjords, and headlands.

A weak point in Olsen's theory is that he does not clearly distinguish between the creator of a name and the user of a name, but it seems that he has in mind the actual creators of the various name types.<sup>5</sup> In a recent article, Ola Stemschaug questions the very existence of names created by travellers.<sup>6</sup> He argues that travelling will often be the *reason* for giving a location a certain name, but the actual creators of the names will be locals. Seafarers may have their own names for locations along a coast, but these names will only exceptionally become widely accepted denotations of the locations. In other words, travellers as a user-group of names may have a different onomasticon than locals, but their name inventory will normally not become generally accepted.

A very clear example which illustrates this is the Swedish names of the rapids along the Dniepr, recorded in c. 950 in the writings of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.<sup>7</sup> These are obviously names coined by Swedes struggling with their boats past the difficult rapids of the river. Importantly, the Swedish names have not survived outside this account. They were frozen in time, being recorded from the onomasticon of a very limited user-group who only had the need for the names as long as their travels took them along the Dniepr. As they were only used by people passing by, the Swedish names had no chance of survival in competition with local names which could be passed on through many generations. There was no reason for the locals to accept new, foreign names from visitors for a topography that they already had names for in their own language.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Olsen, *Hvad våre stedsnavn*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Magnus Olsen, *Ættegård og helligdom: Norske stedsnavn sosialt og religionshistorisk belyst*, Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, Serie A: Forelesninger, 9a (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1926), p. 18. This book has also been published in English as *Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway: The Place-Names of a Country Discussed in their Bearings on Social and Religious History*, trans. by Th. Gleditsch (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1926; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928).

<sup>6</sup> Ola Stemschaug, 'Vegens navn – kva er det?', in *Ortnamn i språk och samhälle. Hyllningsskrift till Lars Hellberg*, ed. by Svante Strandberg, *Nomina Germanica*, 22 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1997), pp. 253–65.

<sup>7</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. by Gyula Moravcsik and trans. by Romilly J. H. Jenkins, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, 1, rev. edn (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on these names, see Knut-Olof Flak, *Dneprforsarnas namn i Kejsar Konstantin VII Porfyrogennetos' 'De administrando imperio'*, *Lunds universitets årsskrift*, N. F. Avd. 1, Bd. 46, Nr 4, Slaviska institutet vid Lunds universitet, Slaviska och baltiska studier, 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1951).

There are some names coined by travellers which are now widely used, for example, *Norway* ('the northern way'), *Strait of Magellan*, and *Easter Island*. These are names obviously not coined by locals. However, the latter two are typical examples of the type of names which a dominant, map-making culture has given to the world. The point is that such names normally denote large areas or distinct features along major travel routes, and they are not likely to be frequent. It is highly unlikely that any farm names or names of valleys and bays will be coined by non-residents or by people that are not neighbours of the farms or topographical features.

The names with the generic *dalr* that Nicolaisen refers to denote either modern farms or relatively small valleys — both categories of names which typically belong to the nomenclature of the local community. This is the group of people who have the greatest need for such names as a means of reference, and this is the group of people who will have preserved the names through time, preventing them from falling into oblivion.

It is time to mention that Nicolaisen's own view has mellowed somewhat over the years.<sup>9</sup> However, in a comparatively recent article on the place-names of Arran, Nicolaisen reintroduces old thoughts.<sup>10</sup> He sees Arran as part of the Norse 'sphere of influence', along with the mainland littoral. About the Norse place-names on the island, he has this to say:

[It is] not the nomenclature of a settled people but of occasional, albeit fairly regular but not always welcome, visitors. It is a nomenclature that experiences the island from the sea, not only visually but also while exploring and utilising it. It is a sailor's toponymic vocabulary and that of the fisherman and the hunter and the herdsman involved in transhumance.<sup>11</sup>

And in characteristic style he gives the underlying semantics of the names:

[...] they are the names of seasonal intruders depleting the rivers and grazing their heifers and their yearlings on shielings on the best grassland easily accessible from the shore. These names are more like onomastic graffiti: 'Skorri was here' proclaims *Scorradel*, 'Skapto rules O.K.' announces *Skaftigill*.<sup>12</sup>

This seems insupportable to me. Although it is more than likely that if the Norse were non-residents in the area, they would have had their own names for the

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'Place-Name Maps – How Reliable Are They?', in *Studia Onomastica: Festschrift till Thorsten Andersson*, ed. by Lena Peterson and S. Strandberg (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989), pp. 262–68 (p. 265), where he hints that the absence of primary settlement names may even reflect 'less permanence of occupation, or at least a very different attitude towards the land'.

<sup>10</sup> W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'Arran Place-Names. A Fresh Look', *Northern Studies*, 28 (1992), 1–13.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolaisen, 'Arran Place-Names', p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolaisen, 'Arran Place-Names', pp. 8–9.

landscape they utilized as fishermen, hunters, and herders, it is unlikely that such names would enter the onomasticon of the locals resident in the area. I have researched such an in-group's onomasticon, viz. how fishermen in Norway use their own names on land-kennings, that is, mountains or other topographical features **by which they need to** navigate.<sup>13</sup> I found that names used by fishermen whilst fishing typically never leave the narrow context within which they exist. They only exist as long as there is a professional need for them and they hardly ever influence the names that people living next to the mountains have for the mountains. Consequently, they will, as a rule, never appear on a map.

While this is the case within a stable monolingual and monoethnic society like the west coast of Norway, the additional problem of an ethnic and linguistic barrier would have had to be crossed in Scotland. How and why would Norse names have won general acceptance within a Gaelic-speaking community to the degree that they were passed on to future Gaelic-speaking generations? In the first quotation, Nicolaisen suggests a solution to this problem by saying that the Norse would have had local Gaels who came with them on their expeditions to the mainland coast and that these Gaels picked up the Norse names and passed them on to future Gaelic generations. However, in a situation like this, the opposite to the suggested scenario is more likely to have happened. We know from history that in similar situations, where newcomers have made use of natives as scouts and interpreters, the normal way of communicating place-names is that the locals pass on their own native names to the newcomers. The maps of Africa, America, and Australia are scattered with names that have been handed down to us from locals informing Europeans of the onomasticon of the area. All in all, it is difficult to see why and how the local, resident Scots, inspired by those of their own who were in Norse service, would have suppressed central names in their name inventory in place of names coined in a totally different language to their own.

The word order and the specifics in the compound names show that there is no question of any borrowing of Norse appellatives into Gaelic at the time. The names in question are clearly coined by speakers of Norse. Therefore, could it be that the resident Scots actually adopted the language of the Norse visitors? Even if this were the case, it still would not be the answer to the very high frequency of Norse names on the west coast littoral. Place-names usually survive a language shift, because names, contrary to words, need not carry meaning. As long as there is population continuity within a given area, the fundamental onomasticon of the population is likely to survive, even if the population happens to switch language. For example, the names of major settlements and large natural features are still Gaelic in areas of Scotland where the Gaelic language itself has succumbed to English. Therefore, a language shift in itself cannot explain why so many important place-names on the Scottish west coast are of Norse origin.

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<sup>13</sup> Arne Kruse, 'Sjønamn på médfjella', *Namn og Nemne*, 15 (1998), 21–31.

The most reasonable explanation for the many Norse names in this area is an ethnic shift; an ethnic (and with it a linguistic) discontinuity which would have seen the Norse taking over substantial parts of the mainland west coast in the form of settlements. Only an ethnically Norse community explains the pattern and frequency of the Norse names that have survived to the present. Furthermore, both the distribution and the sheer number of names of Norse origin indicate a continuum of settlements where Norse was once spoken along the western littoral.

If the Norse were able to leave names for locations they explored and used as visitors, we would expect to have found Norse names spread over a much wider area than we actually do. It is surely not out of the question that the Norse would have explored and also have made certain use of the more inland areas of Scotland, at least as far in as the sea lochs penetrate the Highlands. However, Norse names are not found very far inland. There are many Norse names along the outer coast of the mainland but hardly any single, isolated names at any significant distance from other Norse names. Either an area has several Norse names or none at all. Such a distribution pattern indicates a Norse continuum along significant parts of the mainland coast. Here a fairly unbroken chain of Norse settlers would have meant that most farmers had Norse neighbours not very far away in both directions along the coast.

To illustrate what a Norse speech continuum might have looked like, we can briefly focus on two areas on the west coast, one up towards the north and one in the south. Ian Fraser has analysed the names along the coast of Wester Ross, from Loch Broom to Loch Carron.<sup>14</sup> He lists forty Norse names (including one single habitative name, *Ullapool*) from this section of the coastline and twelve Gaelic names, most of which he regards as post-medieval.<sup>15</sup> Implicitly, Fraser clearly regards the names as denotations of settlements.

On the east coast of Kintyre (see figs 1 and 3 in the article by Jennings in this volume), from Tarbert to Campbeltown, we see the same pattern again. The modern settlement names are mostly of Norse origin (again with one habitative name, *Smerby*, probably from *\*Smjörbyr*) and at least some of the relatively few purely Gaelic names are of a secondary type, for example, *Dippen* 'dark half-penny-land' and names with *achadh* 'field'. It is very difficult to see such stretches of Norse names as anything but products of Norse speaking neighbourhoods.

Nicolaisen's hypothesis that it was Norse visitors and not settlers who left their onomastic imprint on the coast of the mainland is closely linked to the idea that the Norse topographical names are not settlement names — so closely linked that the argument sometimes feels circular. Nicolaisen starts his discussion on the distribution of *dalr*-names by stating, 'There is no reason to think that it [i.e. *dalr*] has ever

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<sup>14</sup> Ian A. Fraser, 'Norse Settlement on the North-West Seaboard', in *Scandinavian Settlement in Northern Britain*, ed. by Barbara E. Crawford (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp. 92–105 (p. 98, fig. 21).

<sup>15</sup> Fraser, 'Norse Settlement', p. 97.

meant anything but what it still means in Norwegian today, i.e. “a valley”.<sup>16</sup> He argues that in spite of the fact that many such names now denote farms, they would initially have denoted a topographical feature and only become attached to a settlement at a later stage. A name like *Crossaig* in Kintyre would then have been used by Norse visitors to designate the bay itself, and likewise *Carradale* and *Torrisdale* to denote the respective glens; only at a later stage were the names used to denote the settlements in the said locations.

One must admit that it is true that *dal* in modern Norwegian means nothing but ‘valley’. However, one is discussing *names*, not appellatives, and the semantics of the name *Dal* in modern Norwegian is not so clear-cut. In Norway today, simplex primary topographical names without the definite article like *Dal*, *Nes*, and *Vik* designate settlements. Many of these simplex topographical farm names are likely to have come about during the transition to permanent settlement, around the time of the birth of Christ.<sup>17</sup> The earliest farms were ‘super-farms’ which actually occupied whole valleys or whole headlands. One can easily understand why neighbours within an area could best refer to these early settlements by indicating their location, and that with names like *Dal* and *Nes* the descriptive appellative side to the name and the address location of the settlement were semantically inseparable. In modern usage, such names are clearly dominated by the settlement itself and not so much by the topographical location of the settlement. From my own area in Nordmøre, Norway, ‘nedi Dala’ first and foremost designate the houses and/or the people living there. I believe this is a very early development. If there is a settlement within the area of, for example, a valley or bay, a topographical name — if it still makes sense to the users — will have dual *designata*; it will refer both to the topographical feature and the settlement itself, and the latter will probably be the most important.<sup>18</sup>

Nicolaisen has coined the term *instant names* for ‘ready-made’ names that the colonists brought with them, like *Breiðvík* and *Sandvík*. We could also claim that the Norse brought with them a set of *instant name connotations*, where, among other things, certain types of names carried more prestige than others. The most prestigious of all would certainly be the topographical names for settlements. As a rule, even today in Norway, the early type of topographical names designate the largest farms, positioned on the best and most central land within an area. It is likely that the Norse settlers in the Viking Age would have chosen to use such prestigious names for the very first names of new settlements.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ola Stemshaug, *Namn i Noreg: Ei innføring i norsk stadnamngransking*, 2nd edn (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1976), p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolaisen himself has later opened up for the possibility of a similar interpretation. In ‘The Semantics of Place-Names and Elements’, in *Merking staðfræðilegra samnafna í örnefnum*, NORNA-Rapporter, 28 (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 1985), pp. 60–69 (p. 68), he says about such farm names as *Sandeid*: ‘The farm names in question could have been created by association on the appellative level without a pre-existing identical name of a natural feature.’



The importance of social ranking in place-names is seen when nineteenth-century Norwegian immigrants to America were told to choose a family name — patronymics were still the norm in Norway at that time. Very many chose to use a place-name as their family name, but rather than the name of the poor cottar's farm they had left behind, many of them chose the name of the main farm on which their cottar's farm was situated or simply the biggest farm in the area they had left. As a result, there are a disproportionate number of family names such as Lee (from Li) and Dahl (from Dal) among Norwegian-Americans today.

The increased frequency of compound topographical names used during the Viking period could be explained by the need for specifics to single out *designata* in more densely populated areas than were previously known. Also, the development of the ship and the resulting migration had vastly increased the geographical radius in which individuals needed names as address tags. In order to distinguish between the farms situated in the many valleys of Iceland, they were mostly given compound names. Even Ingólfr, the first Norse settler in Iceland, established himself at *Reykjavík* ('The Smoky Bay'), and when Erik the Red (Eiríkr hinn Rauði) founded his farm in Greenland, the simplex *\*Hlíð* ('Slope') was not found to be precise enough and a specific was added, giving *Brattahlíð* ('Steep Slope').

Between the first establishment of farms in Scandinavia and the Viking exodus, society organized around the extended family unit disintegrated. There was a gradual move towards a social organization where the individual played a more important role. We can observe this in the names of the many farms established during the Viking Age, when the person who cleared the land or took up residence on the farm starts to be remembered in the name of the farm. We see it in habitative names all over *Terra Scandinavica*, for example, *Grimshader* and *Swanibost*; and we can probably see the same process taking place in the many farms that carry a personal name compounded with a topographical generic, for example, *Torrisdale* and *Skorridale*.

By the Viking Age, there were certainly some very fashionable generics used for new settlements, for example, *staðir*, *setr*, and *bólstaðr*. However, we can observe that new settlements established during this period — in Scandinavia as well as in its colonies — were certainly also given topographical names. In Finnur Jónsson's register of over 7100 Icelandic farm names, around half are topographical names.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps of more relevance to the initial settlement, the nine most used generics indicating topography are found in approximately 35% of all the farm-names of *Landnámabók*, while the eleven most used habitative generics make up approximately 33%.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Finnur Jónsson, 'Bæjanöfn á Íslandi', in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmenta að fornu og nýju*, I, IV (Reykjavík and Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmentafélag, 1856, 1907–15), IV (1991), 412–584, 917–37.

<sup>20</sup> Oskar Bandle, 'Die Ortsnamen der *Landnámabók*', in *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. by Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússon, 1977), pp. 47–68.

On the Faroe Islands, of the *bygdir* ‘small villages’ and *býlingar* ‘farms’ which are recorded by the end of the sixteenth century, 68% of the *bygd*-names and 53% of the *býlingur*-names have topographical generics, while the figures for habitative generics in *bygd*-names and for *býlingur*-names are 15% and 26% respectively.<sup>21</sup>

In the name material from the Faroes there is a striking absence of the habitative elements *staðir* and *setr/sætr*, which distinguishes the nomenclature of these islands from that of Shetland and Iceland. Lindsay MacGregor has made a convincing analysis of the similarities and differences between the Faroes and Shetland.<sup>22</sup> She points to the many primary farms on Shetland with topographical names and the relative secondary nature of the farms with habitative generics, and she attributes the lack of habitative generics on the Faroes to the settlement pattern on the islands. The habitative naming elements are not present because the type of settlement that they indicate is not found:

In Shetland, *staðir*-names were applied to secondary but favourable sites, separate from primary farms; *bólstaðir*-names were given to large farms established on existing cultivated fields or to divisions of existing farms; and *sætr*-names were given to marginal settlements on hill-grazing land. All these types of settlements are absent from Faroe, precluded by the constraints of the landscape.<sup>23</sup>

Parts of what MacGregor says about the Faroes are applicable to the west coast of mainland Scotland, although the explanation for the lack of habitative elements is likely to be different. What is relevant is the strong argument for the primary character of farms carrying topographical names and the importance of considering the particular topography and settlement type in connection with place-name chronology.

MacGregor claims that when you take into consideration topographical and land assessment evidence, primary farms are easily distinguished from secondary farms, and that this is also reflected in the generics of secondary inland farms with topographical names.<sup>24</sup> The primary sites are named after the most prominent, mostly coastal, topographical features in the locality, such as *eið* ‘isthmus’, *strönd* ‘strand’/‘shore’, *vágr* ‘bay’/‘creek’, and *dalr* ‘valley’. In both Shetland and the Faroes, the majority of sites with topographical names of a more secondary character relate to inland features, such as *á* ‘river’, *haugr* ‘mound’, *hamarr* ‘crag’/‘precipice’, *brekka* ‘slope’, and *fall* ‘mountain’.

The Norse topographical generics used on the Scottish west coast are much more one-dimensional than those found in Shetland and the Faroes. They are basically

<sup>21</sup> Arne Thorsteinsson, ‘Færøske bebyggelsesnavne med -bø’, in *Den ellefte nordiske navneforskerkongressen, Sundvollen 19.-23. juni 1994*, ed. by Kristoffer Kruken, NORNA-Rapporter, 60 (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 1996), pp. 183–96.

<sup>22</sup> Lindsay J. MacGregor, ‘Norse Naming Elements in Shetland and Faroe: A Comparative Study’, *Northern Studies*, 23 (1986), 84–101.

<sup>23</sup> MacGregor, ‘Norse Naming Elements’, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> MacGregor, ‘Norse Naming Elements’, p. 87.

*dalr* ‘valley’ and *vík* ‘inlet’/‘small bay’, while the topographical generics of a more secondary character are, to a great extent, absent. This, along with the absence of habitative place-names, surely points to a scenario whereby a Norse population established itself along the coast. They used prominent topographical features to name their primary settlement sites, and when the time came for further expansion and division of farms, this did not happen within the medium of the Norse language.

There seems to be a growing agreement among scholars that nature-names have been used in the Scandinavian colonies to designate settlements and, more particularly, very early settlements. This is more or less explicitly expressed in works by scholars such as Ian Fraser and, not least, Barbara E. Crawford who has expressed strong reservations towards the elimination of topographical names from any settlement chronology.<sup>25</sup> Still, Nicolaisen’s main idea has not been directly contradicted, neither by himself nor by others, and his interpretation of the distribution of the Norse settlement is still often referred to.

Hugh Marwick, the first scholar to establish a chronology of Norse settlement names in Orkney, did indeed recognize the importance of settlements with topographical names, which, he says, ‘have undoubtedly to be classed among the very earliest settlements’.<sup>26</sup> Marwick, and later Nicolaisen, still chose to leave out such names from their chronologies, as the age of topographical names is difficult to establish. Not much has been done to correct this obvious error in the chronological schemes. It would, for example, be possible to examine the correlation between name-types and primary farms, using archaeological, geographical, and fiscal methods, as shown by MacGregor and Fraser.<sup>27</sup> Also, a closer study of the fringes of Norse settlement in Scotland may reveal information about chronology, and it is in this context that the west coast of the mainland is interesting.

This essay is written with the conviction that the discrepancy between habitative names and topographical names, which Nicolaisen observed, is significant, and that it might even say something important about the sequence of events during the Norse period. The usual explanation of the discrepancy, however, is not acceptable, mainly because it would assume that the Norse on the west coast of Scotland established naming patterns that were significantly different to those they used elsewhere.

What the disparity may rather indicate is an intense but short-lived Norse period on the mainland. In such a scenario the newcomers established a Norse-speaking continuum of settlements where they made use of the most prestigious naming

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<sup>25</sup> Fraser, ‘Norse Settlement’; Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, Scotland in the Early Middle Ages, 2 (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), p. 111; **Author, ‘title’**, in *Scandinavian Settlement in Northern Britain*, ed. by Crawford, pp. 10–13.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Marwick, *Orkney Farm-Names* (Kirkwall: Mackintosh, 1952), p. 248.

<sup>27</sup> MacGregor, ‘Norse Naming Elements’; Ian A. Fraser, ‘What Is a *vik*? An Investigation into an Old Norse Coastal Typonym’, in *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross*, ed. by J. R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: The Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1994), pp. 69–78.

elements that they knew from home in order to name farms in a rugged landscape that invited and reinforced the use of topographical naming elements. The lifespan of this Norse-speaking community seems to have been short, as there is hardly any use of topographical generics of a secondary character nor of traditional habitative elements to indicate the division of farms or the clearing of new land. By the time this was necessary, it seems that Gaelic naming elements were being used.<sup>28</sup> As this only points to a language shift, not an ethnic shift, this Gaelic-speaking community continued to use the Norse names that were by then well established.

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<sup>28</sup> See more on this in Andrew Jennings's article in this volume.